How Is the Saudi Public Likely Responding to the Crisis over Khashoggi's Disappearance? The Popularity of Riyadh's "Reformist Repression"

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Oct 16, 2018
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Brief Analysis

The mysterious and deeply troubling disappearance of noted Saudi political commentator Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul has refocused attention on the paradox of Saudi "reformist repression." Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's arrival in Saudi Arabia highlights the seriousness of this episode, and if Saudi agents were indeed involved, then, in Talleyrand's famous phrase, "it was worse than a crime—it was a mistake." No doubt the Western, Turkish, and some anti-Saudi regional media, and presumably some government agencies as well, will surely strive to keep the focus on this shocking incident.

But a key question, likely to be overlooked or confused in that discussion, is this: how much do Saudis themselves—as opposed to Western experts, media, or NGOs—really know or care about such problems? The question is key because it bears directly on the perennial issue of Saudi stability. Many different factors figure in that calculation, from individual violence to foreign intervention to elite factionalism, and more. In the long run, too, an erosion of domestic and foreign business confidence might outweigh today's windfall profits from 80 dollars per barrel of oil. But right now, can the latest arrests and disappearances be a cause, or perhaps a consequence, of some major upheaval brewing beneath the kingdom's generally placid surface?

Based on a recent visit to Riyadh, and subsequent conversations with Saudis and others about Khashoggi and similar cases, my short answer is probably not. Awful as this episode appears to be, its broader significance is a separate question. And while such incidents understandably damage Saudi Arabia's image among some Western governments, analysts, journalists, and investors, they are of remarkably little interest to most people inside the country. As a result, contrary to conventional wisdom, they do not seriously threaten the kingdom's government—at least not with the specter of mass protest, or of organized dissidence by major segments of the society such as the business, clerical, professional, or military establishments.

One factor behind this judgment is the clear (though little-known) evidence that the Saudi government is

increasingly aware of, interested in, and at least to some extent receptive to its own public's views. In July, during my most recent visit to Saudi Arabia, I spent a day at the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, a Riyadh-based institute for assessing popular attitudes and promoting intra-Saudi discourse. The institute was founded fifteen years ago, but significantly increased its productivity after Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) was named crown prince two years ago. It is at least nominally independent; funding, I was told, comes from renting out two of the three massive office towers it owns in downtown Riyadh.

Experts at the Center are trying to encourage the Saudi public to participate in discussion and debate on issues that affect ordinary Saudis, and on the overall direction of the country. One goal is to foster a sense of unity on behalf of the common good and national interests. The Center holds workshops, seminars, and large-scale festivals and gatherings across the country, engaging hundreds of thousands of Saudis over the past decade and a half.

But another, newer goal of this Center is to keep a finger on the pulse of public opinion for systematic input on official policies—not just outreach to promote those policies after the fact. This, one of its top managers readily acknowledged, is an unfamiliar and challenging concept in Saudi Arabia, but is currently taken quite seriously at the highest levels of government. So around the time of MbS's ascent, the Center established a division dedicated to conducting opinion polls. Since then, it has fielded over 100 polls, surveying a total of around 33,000 Saudis.

According to the experts I talked to, the Center's insights have enabled it to provide the government with more than 100 specific policy recommendations over the past two years, 65 of which were accepted and implemented. One striking case is popular support for the long-awaited decision this year to allow Saudi women to drive. Other initiatives, the pollsters told me, range across the gamut of social and economic issues, including the selective but very public crackdown on corruption.

As a pollster myself, I was both intrigued and reasonably impressed by all this, though unfortunately unable to obtain further details. From my own polls in Saudi Arabia, I know that Saudis have been willing to voice very mixed views even on some especially sensitive issues. For example, **asked last year (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/unique-saudi-poll-shows-moderate-majority-but-sectarian-split)** if Islam "should be interpreted in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction," just 30 percent said yes—though that was double the figure from late 2015. But on foreign policy issues, my polls confirm that Saudi official policies are largely in tune with the public. Fear and loathing of Iran and its regional proxies, from the Houthis to Hezbollah, is nearly universal not just among the Saudi elite, but on the Saudi street as well.

Much the same is true, albeit with smaller majorities, for other seemingly provocative moves: the feud with Qatar, the close alliance with the United States, and even the conditional support for a settlement with Israel. The Saudi head of the Muslim World League, for example, recently made the astonishing proposal to march for peace to Jerusalem—along with Jewish and Christian clerics. Yet he would do so with tacit support from around two-thirds of the Saudi public, who say that peace with Israel is desirable as long as Palestinian rights are also respected.

Beyond such statistical support for the Saudi government's evolving mix of top-down domestic reform and foreign activism, anecdotal evidence points in the same direction. For example, when I asked some well-connected but independent Saudi professionals about Jamal Khashoggi's unknown fate, they seemed unfazed. Indeed, they sounded more concerned about the media firestorm this incident has provoked than about the man himself—or the cruel limits on personal freedoms his case exemplifies. As for the minority of truly disgruntled Saudis, Khashoggi's shocking example will likely intimidate more than it will alienate, let alone arouse to action. Indeed, that was probably the overly aggressive motive behind his apparent abduction in the first place.

More broadly, when I talked to young middle-class Saudis in Riyadh about the arbitrary nature of the anti-corruption crackdown, most were not just unconcerned but positively enthusiastic. One typical comment: "After forty years of

ill-gotten gains, those guys at the Ritz got what they deserved." Others argued that, even granted some unavoidable unfairness, such autocratic behavior was a price worth paying for the increased social freedoms that Saudis are beginning to enjoy. External criticism of this tradeoff, they said, was simply misguided, if not ill-intentioned.

Similar opinions emerged on the war in neighboring Yemen: while some foreigners view Saudi intervention there as a needless bloody quagmire, most Saudis I've talked to lately, whether inside or outside their country, still see it as necessary self-defense. One American defense expert, an experienced veteran with fluent Arabic who spent the last few years working with Saudi soldiers in-country, tells me that most of them have long viewed the Houthis in Yemen as a real threat to themselves. Their chief complaint, he said, is not about the grindingly slow progress of the Saudi combat effort, but the half-hearted American support for it.

Other supposed Saudi foreign policy blunders, from the abortive kidnapping of Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri to the fruitless boycott of Qatar, also tend to get a nod of approval, a rationalization, or at worst a shrug from most Saudis I encounter. Of course the Saudi media, including social media, are tightly controlled, and lately many Saudis are cautious even about private conversations. To be sure, some sharp criticism does make its way into online Arabic discourse, despite all the restrictions. Yet there is no sign of any groundswell of mass popular opposition, nor of concentrated resistance in key segments of Saudi society.

One last factor behind the approval (or just acquiescence) of so many Saudis is their sense that Saudi expertise about their own region is at least on a par with any outside assessments. They have more reason today than ever before to feel that way. In the past few years, I have come to know and respect bona fide Saudi academic experts on Iran, on Yemen, on Shia, and even on Israel. They now have more of the requisite linguistic proficiency, intellectual independence, and sometimes even the living experience in those areas to offer informed advice about them. Today, too, there exists a small but growing number of Saudi think tanks to support this pool of local knowledge and counsel.

Altogether, then, the wisdom and ethics of current Saudi policies and practices, ranging from the whereabouts of Jamal Khashoggi to the war in Yemen, from the crackdown on corruption to the crackdown on free speech, appear very different inside and outside the kingdom. Some outsiders may well question particular Saudi government choices. They should not, however, confuse their own judgments with dire, unfounded predictions about Saudi instability. Inside the kingdom, issues that loom large abroad are outweighed by the Saudi government's overall attentiveness to the pulse of its people. ❖

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